DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 447 497 CS 217 303

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TITLE	Empowering At-Risk Students: Storytelling as a Pedagogical Tool.
PUB DATE	2000-11-00
NOTE	12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Communication Association (86th, Seattle, WA, November 9-12, 2000).
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Classroom Techniques; *Diversity (Student); *High Risk Students; Higher Education; *Interpersonal Communication; *Story Telling; *Student Empowerment
IDENTIFIERS	Communication Context; Learning Environments; Personal Experiences

ABSTRACT

Due to the fact that college classrooms are increasingly culturally diverse, the challenge for instructors is to foster a learning environment in which students gain a more focused sense of identity and achieve academic success. Through the use of stories in the communication classroom, at-risk students from diverse backgrounds can recognize the value and significance of personal experience in their lives. The use of storytelling has the potential to facilitate understanding of communication concepts in applicable, everyday contexts. This potentially empowering instructional tool promotes the creation of a "shared experience in the classroom" with peers and the professor (Hogg, 1995). Experiential pedagogical tools, such as storytelling, may help students develop the trust in themselves and in others through classroom interaction. By sharing stories, students may realize the relevance, validity, and efficacy of their cultural heritages and learning abilities, regardless of cultural differences. More research needs to be completed to illustrate how stories shared by students from diverse cultures can be more effectively evaluated. (Contains 33 references.) (NKA)

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ED 447 497

Running Head: AT-RISK STORYTELLING

Empowering At-Risk Students: Storytelling as a Pedagogical Tool

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Empowering At-Risk Students:
Storytelling As a Pedagogical Tool
Abstract

Through the use of stories in the communication classroom, at-risk students, from diverse backgrounds, recognize the value and significance of personal experience in their lives. The use of storytelling has the potential to facilitate understanding of communication concepts in applicable, every day contexts. This potentially empowering instructional tool promotes the creation of a "shared experience in the classroom" with peers and with the professor (Hogg, 1995). By sharing stories, students may realize the relevance, validity, and efficacy of their cultural heritages and learning abilities, regardless of cultural differences.

College students represent a myriad of culturally diverse perspectives based on lived experiences, and cultural heritage. Due to the fact that college classrooms are increasingly culturally diverse, the challenge for instructors is to foster a learning environment in which students gain a more focused sense of identity and achieve academic success. Creating an empowering environment requires focusing on the processes of developing trust in self and others, participation, and communication in the classroom (Brunson & Vogt, 1996). At-risk students who share lived experiences in class, through storytelling assignments, can sharpen communication skills and eventually develop trust among their classmates. Storytelling is a pedagogical strategy that gives students "voice" in the classroom. "Students whose input is solicited feel a greater sense of ownership with the educational process, and this, in turn, increases student engagement in all aspects of school" (Johnson, 1991, p. 2). Student contributions can be encouraged, and a sense of ownership gained through the use of storytelling. Giving students "voice" in the classroom demonstrates respect for their lived experiences and diverse cultural perspectives. Teachers who create an empowering environment in which at-risk students are given a voice to explore their self-efficacy, demonstrate cultural pride, and share lived-experiences helps to increase the possibility of students' success.

Student Diversity

The diverse backgrounds of college students enrich university classrooms and challenge conventional teaching strategies. In recent years, the arrival of international students to the United States has led to one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse societies in history (Dembo, 1991). There are a number of factors relevant to at-risk students' cognition that are a result of or connected to culture. One of the factors worth consideration is how culture may influence students' approach to learning (Lind, 1997).

Extensive research indicates how students from diverse cultural backgrounds benefit differently from various pedagogical techniques. Student diversity in the communication classroom is important to understand for two pedagogical reasons: "(1) cultural differences may result in differences in learning style and (2) understanding cultural differences can help us communicate more effectively with our students" (Cooper, 1995, p. 280). Clearly, university students reflect a wide diversity of cultural, age-related, and cognitive perspectives (Kasworm, 1993).

Today's university students represent a myriad of backgrounds, traditions, and languages (Putnam, 1993). Humans convey a unique perspective of their world and cultural identity when they step into a university classroom (Kasworm, 1993). Through storytelling, students and instructors have the opportunity to cultivate a learning environment open to multicultural dialogues that may provide an understanding of different customs, beliefs, and viewpoints. Kasworm (1993) tells us "we need to speak to the uniqueness of every student, rather than creating ghettos of exclusion" (p. 163). Lutzker (1995) believes it is essential for students in this country to "understand that we are all 'the other' to the rest of the world" (p. 1).

"One of the pressing duties of educators is responding to the needs, not only of academically diverse students, but also of culturally heterogeneous students, in their classrooms" (Williams, 1993, p. 145). Putnam (1993) stresses the importance for consideration of "the unique needs, characteristics, and learning styles of all students in the design and delivery of instruction" (p. 11). In order to effectively combine students who have challenging academic and cultural needs in classrooms today, there is a need to create learning environments that deny isolation, rejection, and stereotyping (Putnam, 1993).

Establishing a classroom that accommodates diverse students who have varied backgrounds, interests, and preferences poses a challenging situation for teachers. Chen and Goldring (1994) suggest that schools with a "diverse student body may be more open to innovative teaching strategies and ideas" (p. 58). A variety of teaching methods increases the likelihood that students receive positive avenues for achieving success in the classroom.

Student Empowerment

Student empowerment is characterized by control over one's own life and allowing others to do the same. Robinson (1994) suggests that:

> empowerment is marked by respect for each individual in the group based not on a position of authority or the skills of each individual but on the sense that each person has a valuable contribution to make, each has a unique voice that echoes the unique experiences of the individual and joins in the voices of others in the classroom community. (p. 159)

In order to create an empowering environment the student deserves to be taken into consideration: respected and validated for her/his unique perspective and classroom

participation. Each student has a cultural heritage, and lived experiences which in combination, make her or him unique. Empowered students see themselves as significant contributors to the classroom environment whose ideas and contributions are respected (Byham, Cox & Shomo, 1992). Empowered individuals gain satisfaction from success of activities to which they are involved and committed (Byham, et al, 1992). Mirman, Swartz, and Barell (1988) indicate that "having both knowledge itself and a climate in which that knowledge is used and valued is necessary to empower teachers and students" (p. 146).

Shor (1986) suggests a pedagogy of empowerment "is participatory, critical, values-oriented, multicultural, student-oriented, experiential, research-minded and interdisciplinary" (p. 418). Experiential pedagogical tools, such as storytelling, may help students develop the trust in themselves and in others through classroom interaction. Higher education is based on the beliefs of dignity and efficacy of diverse individuals within the learning environment (Kasworm, 1993).

Storytelling as a Pedagogical Tool

The nature of today's diverse classrooms calls for teachers to adapt their teaching methods to provide at-risk students with multiple opportunities to succeed. Thus, a virtual repertoire of innovative teaching strategies is warranted. Elkins (1996) states "a teacher who knows only one teaching strategy is like a chef who knows only how to prepare one meal" (p. 41). One teaching method worth examining is the use of storytelling for culturally diverse student populations and students at-risk.

Considerable evidence exists regarding the validity, worth, and cultural richness of storytelling in diverse civilizations. Virtually every culture known to humans has shared some form of storytelling as a means to explore cultural ancestry, collective and individual identities, as well as to educate and entertain. "Stories are told in a society to reflect and reinforce a shared sense of values" (Spagnoli, 1995, p. 221). Anthropologists, ethnographers, folklorists, and linguists have studied oral storytelling traditions focusing on how the culture is represented by the story content. Kremer (1998) views storytelling as a means to "affirm an ancient way of being present to knowing" (1).

For many individuals, storytelling yields great insight and a deeper understanding of the world around us, a way of knowing, a search for meaning (Conquergood, 1993), and a means of reflection (Pelias, 1993). Through the use of this

teaching method, at-risk students may come to a better understanding of specific communication concepts by linking them to personal experiences through oral reflection. Oral sharing of experiences and events is a natural part of our everyday lives which helps us conceptualize our life experiences (Langellier, 1989; Stahl, 1983). Greene (1994) claims that "narratives, we have come to realize, are the means by which we gradually impart meaning to the events of our own lives" (p. 14).

By using stories to link communication concepts to lived experiences, teachers may effectively model "the importance of narrative knowing" in the context of diverse cultures (Kremer, 1998). Cooper and Stewart (1982) recommend "one of the ways in which teachers affect...acquisition of language skills is through modeling" and advise that, without interaction between students and teachers, modeling has less impact (p. 11). Using storytelling as one pedagogical method could positively influence language acquisition by exposing students to others' language use. Williams (1983) eloquently relates that "shared knowledge equals power. Energy. Strength. Story is an affirmation of our ties to one another" (p. 130).

Considerations

The primary goal of using storytelling as a pedagogical tool for at-risk students is to give students "voice" in the classroom to explore their self-efficacy, demonstrate cultural pride, and share lived-experiences. However, Lind (1997) wisely cautions that "given the diversity in the classroom, students are affected differentially by the efforts and methods of the instructor" (p. 2).

Just as students learn to communicate based on their cultural perspectives, teachers also communicate from specific cultural perspectives, most of which are Eurocentric. McCabe (1997) acknowledges that "86.5% of teachers are white non-Hispanics according to the 1993 figures compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics" (p. 453). Monocentrism and cultural assumptions need to be checked to avoid stereotyping when evaluating students' stories. Stories from different cultures "should not be dismissed as simply 'not making sense,' as if that property were an objective, culture-free one" (McCabe, 1997, p. 462).

McCabe (1997) recognizes that "no form of analyzing narratives works equally well for all cultures" (p. 459). Although differences in storytelling styles and various cultural themes are likely to occur, this is not a valid reason to preclude this pedagogical tool from being utilized. Clearly, more research needs to be completed to

illustrate how stories shared by students from diverse cultures can be more effectively evaluated.

"Unless teachers understand that there are diverse ways of communicating and inform students about such differences, barriers to cross-cultural communication among students may remain" (McCabe, 1997, p. 485). Discussing and researching with students about how stories are processed and articulated is more likely to enrich everyone's understanding of diverse cultural perspectives. Evidence reveals that storytelling traditions provide a means for understanding stories from cultures not one's own (McCabe, 1997).

Conclusion

Telling a story gives value and significance to events in a student's life (Brown, 1995). I propose that the use of storytelling in the classroom for at-risk students has the potential to give their lived experiences validity and efficacy, regardless of their cultural background. Educators interested in effectively teaching diverse student populations should no doubt appreciate occasions to explore multiple pedagogical options and learning opportunities for at-risk students. Student empowerment derives from feeling valued, in control of one's options, and a sense of inclusion. "Many people avoid discussion of cultural differences out of a sense that only attention to universals of human conditions is nonracist and a concern that talking about cultural groups smacks of oppression and stereotyping" (McCabe, 1997, p. 487). I submit that avoiding discussion of differences perpetuates stereotyping due to a lack of understanding. Appreciation for what makes each student, each teacher unique can only serve to cultivate an empowering learning environment.

Teachers who take the time to listen to and validate students' stories communicate positive attitudes toward listening skills and help to facilitate an environment in which each "voice" is respected. Through oral storytelling, students may feel empowered as participants rather than passive recipients of knowledge.

This potentially empowering instructional tool facilitates the creation of a "shared experience in the classroom" (Hogg, 1995, p. 2) with peers and with the teacher. Discovery of self and others through stories might certainly prove beneficial for students, and instructors. Pagano (1991) believes that "selfhood begins in imagination, through processes of identification encouraged by the stories that we tell each other" (p. 266).

Through the use of this pedagogy in the communication classroom, teachers may orient at-risk students to different ways of knowing, learning, and making sense of communication concepts. I do not suggest that storytelling should be considered a replacement for current teaching strategies for any communication course. Pagano (1991) suggests "students' stories and questions do not displace the curriculum or the texts; they become part of it, just as our own stories and questions are part of our teaching" (p. 266). By utilizing the benefits of this pedagogical strategy in communication classrooms, I believe educators could help expand students' creative and cognitive abilities. While taking the individual into consideration, educators using multiple teaching methods could validate unique as well as shared qualities. According to Pagano (1991), "Through storytelling we may find what is common to us as well as what distinguishes us" (p. 266).

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